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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL ECON BO

SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO SEEKS TO ASSUAGE CONCERNS OVER PERSONAL  
AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

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¶1. (SBU) During his latest speeches on April 4-9, Lukashenko emphasized that he remains in firm control of the country. Lukashenko stated that while the recent oil and gas conflict had caused problems for the economy, these problems would soon be overcome and forgotten. He declared that recent efforts to diversify the sources of Belarus' petroleum supply were not directed against Russia and would not be used as a "lever" against Russia. Lukashenko also acknowledged that he wants relations with the EU to improve, but a dialogue remains impossible with sanctions in place. End summary.

Lukashenko Still Firmly in Control

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¶2. (U) In response to recent rumors and speculation about him and the leadership of Belarus, Lukashenko stated April 8 that he remains in "full control" of the situation in the country. He underlined that no significant changes had taken place in the last year, and while some would like to see him begin "teetering", he would continue to stand firm. Lukashenko also emphasized that he had kept the promise he made a year ago to maintain peace and stability in the country, and that any force that could potentially threaten that peace had already been dealt with.

Tough Economic Times Will Soon Be Over

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¶3. (U) During his Easter speech, Lukashenko admitted that the oil and gas conflict with Russia, which he blamed on resentful Russian oligarchs, was a "powerful blow" to the Belarusian economy. However, he assured everyone that the economy had already begun to overcome the effects, that Belarus' economy would soon stand "on its feet" again, and that by summer Belarus would forget that it ever happened.

¶4. Lukashenko explained that profits from oil exploration in places such as Iran and Venezuela could be used to purchase Russian oil at world prices. He then elaborated and explained that while these moves were not directed at Russia and would not be used as a "lever" against them, they would allow Belarus to import oil from a variety of sources should relations with Russia make it necessary. However, Lukashenko later stressed more than once that despite any disputes over oil and gas, Belarusians and Russians remain "one people" and will continue to cooperate on security and defense.

No Dialogue with the EU until Sanctions are Lifted

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**¶15. (U)** In a speech on April 4 Lukashenko said that he believes it is the EU who is missing out on a real chance to agree with Belarus and have the "best kind of partner." Lukashenko elaborated by saying that while relations with the EU should continue to grow based on mutual interests, Belarus would not stand for any prodding from the EU. Moreover, before a dialogue can begin, the EU must lift existing sanctions against Belarusian state officials. Lukashenko further emphasized that if the EU imposed sanctions under the GSP, they would in effect be taking Belarus "by the throat," and then he would not agree to any kind of talks.

Comment  
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**¶16. (C)** It appears from the content of his latest public speeches that Lukashenko is trying to reassure those both in and outside of Belarus that, despite rumors to the contrary, neither his health nor the state of the economy has affected his control over the country. In fact, his statement that relations with the EU will only progress on his terms seems to indicate that Lukashenko feels that he will soon be in an even better bargaining position than before the oil and gas conflict. However, despite brazen statements toward Europe, Lukashenko apparently realizes that Russia is and will remain an important neighbor. Hence Lukashenko's attempts to reassure Russia that Belarus still values good relations with it and plans to continue cooperating in spheres of mutual interest.

Moore